

99-E-7
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INFORMATION AS A TOOL OF STATECRAFT

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Committee 6

14 September 1998

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 14 SEP 1998		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 14-09-1998 to 14-09-1998	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Information as a Tool of Statecraft				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

INTRODUCTION

Few persons today would argue the world is in the midst of a far-reaching information-based revolution. As a result of this "revolution", some practitioners of statecraft would assert that information is no longer the little brother to defense or diplomacy, but now rivals or even supplants them as an effective element of national power. Others contend it is unclear if the rapid advances in information technology herald new opportunities for strategists.¹ With the debate still at this basic level, it is certainly obvious makers of modern strategy are far from translating the powers of the Internet into national power as did 19th century Prussian statesman Helmuth von Moltke who exploited the power of railroads to realize the power of the industrial revolution

Clearly then today's national strategists need to continue analyzing the information revolution and the role it plays in national security. A helpful way to decipher the relevance of information as a tool of statecraft is to evaluate it according to its ability to influence other states or non-state actors (NSA) in a manner which helps achieve United States national security goals. To that end, this paper evaluates information as an element of national power according to its ability, through persuasion, cooperation or coercion, to assist in achieving US national policy objectives. The results of this examination are revealing. In performing this study one finds that information, as an element of state power has applications in all three areas. This finding challenges constricted traditional thinking which considers information suitable only as a persuasive tool of statecraft.

¹Terry L Deibel, *Fundamentals of Statecraft* (National War College Core Course 5601 Syllabus, Fall 1998-1999), 46

PERSUASION

It's not surprising that many statecraft experts speak of information as a soft instrument of national power appropriate only for persuasion.² Indeed there are abundant examples of information being used in a persuasive manner to further United States national objectives. Strategists use persuasive tools as a means of convincing other nations or transnational actors that it would be in their best interest to change their behavior if that behavior runs counter to US interests. Persuasive instruments seek to do this simply by force of argument, without resorting to threats or promises, and still less to punishments or rewards.³

During World War II the allies used persuasive information, in the form of air dropped propaganda leaflets, extensively against German civilians. The leaflets gave accurate accounts of the ongoing struggle and attempted to incite internal German resistance to the Third Reich. Post-war assessments determined the leaflets were a significant contributing factor in the eventual defeat of German military forces.⁴ In the wake of World War II, persuasive information became a cornerstone of America's Cold War strategy. The powerful transmitters of Radio Free Europe broadcast America's message across the iron curtain with the intent of undermining communism with the values of democracy. This effort continues today as Voice of America and

²For a complete discussion of information as a "soft power" tool of statecraft, see "America's Information Edge", by Joseph S. Nye and William A. Owens in the March-April 1996 edition of *Foreign Affairs*

³Diebel, *Fundamentals of Statecraft*, 39

⁴Christopher M. Centner, "Precision-Guided Propaganda: Exploiting the US Information Advantage in Peacetime," *Strategic Review* (Spring 1997) 35

Radio Free Asia broadcasts bypass government censoring in repressive regimes like those in Burma, Vietnam, China, Cuba and Iran.⁵

As these examples demonstrate, information has been a persuasive tool of statecraft for many years. The impact of the information revolution, with the exponential increase of information conduits, will only increase the usefulness of persuasive information. Canadian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Gordon Smith captured the sense of this capability in a recent speech entitled "Virtual Diplomacy".

"Of course, there was a time when diplomats were the sole interlocutors between countries. Now, unmediated dialogue and information exchange between citizens from around the world occurs 24 hours a day. Information technologies multiply the connections between people and, in so doing, break down hierarchy; and confidentiality, while enabling new forms of sharing social and cultural resources."⁶

In the wide open environment described by Smith, one can readily see how organizations like the United States Information Agency (USIA) can capitalize on this myriad of new information outlets to expand the broadcasts of American values.

Still, while persuasive information has many characteristics to recommend its use, it is not without negatives. Foremost, it's hard to measure success. As mentioned, the United States would like to believe the influences of Radio Free Europe and like venues spread the virtues of democracy which penetrated the iron curtain and contributed to Russia's eventual rejection of communism.

While we may strongly suspect this to be the case, it's really impossible to

⁵Ben Barber, "They're Busy Airing the Truth, VOA Broadcasts Adapting to End of Cold War Era," *The Washington Times*, 4 May 1988, A12

⁶Gordon Smith, "The Challenge of Virtual Diplomacy" (paper presented to the United States Information Agency Advisory Committee on Diplomacy, Washington DC, 2 April 1997)

prove persuasive information as the sole or primary cause. Likewise, USIA embassy officers attempt to measure the effectiveness of their local county campaigns by the number of pro-US articles in local papers or the number of hits on their Internet WEB sites.⁷ Both are important, but decidedly unscientific measurements of effectiveness. Finally, mass dissemination can backfire. In an unrestricted environment of electronic broadcast, Americans can appear to embrace the self-serving values of Dallas' J. R. Ewing more than those of the founding fathers.

COOPERATION

Not only does the information revolution increase the capacity to use information as a persuasive instrument of national power, it also allows for the use of information in other ways. An aphorism spawned by the information age says that information is power and information sharing is powerful. Within this context, it becomes apparent how information can become a powerful cooperative tool of statecraft. A cooperative instrument is one used by strategists to influence nations or transnational actors through the use of positive incentives or rewards.⁸ Two common cooperative instruments are trade policy or foreign aid which use economic rewards in return for cooperating with the United States. As with these tools, information can be used to barter for a nation's cooperation.

The following example illustrates this process. In September 1996, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) sponsored the All-Africa Telecommunications, Information Technology, Trade & Investment Conference at Arlington, Virginia. In the keynote address, FCC Chairman William E

⁷Andrew Koss, interview by author, Ft McNair, Washington DC, 8 Sep 1998

⁸Deibel, *Fundamentals of Statecraft*, 49

Kennard spoke extensively concerning the United States' commitment to African Information Infrastructure (AII) development. One of the main goals of AII is to obtain universal Internet access throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Kennard dangled before the assembled African contingent the prospect of US communications technology transfers if they were used in the "right environment". In this instance the right environment, as outlined by Kennard, would be one which mirrored US values like freedom of access, private ownership and open market competition. The FCC's *quid pro quo* proposal seemed clear, the US would trade information in exchange for the acceptance of democratic principles by the recipient countries ⁹

Presidential Decision Directive (PDD)-23 is another example of how the US government uses the power of information as an incentive to achieve national strategy goals. Issued March 10, 1994, PDD-23 outlines US policy on foreign access to remote sensing space capabilities. As the directive explains, the US operates reconnaissance satellites which are national level assets due to their singular capability to monitor world events on a near real-time basis. As to the transfer of this capability to foreign nations, PDD-23 says this may be acceptable contingent upon "...the proposed foreign recipient's willingness and ability to accept commitments to the US Government...".¹⁰ As with the preceding example concerning the FCC, PDD-23 demonstrates the power of information as a cooperative tool of statecraft which can promote US policy objectives.

⁹William E Kennard, "African Telecommunications A Partnership for Progress" (Paper presented at the seventh All-Africa Telecommunications, Information Technology, Trade & Investment Conference, Arlington, Virginia, 9 September 1998)

¹⁰Presidential Decision Directive (PDD)-23, 10 March 1994 US Policy on Foreign Access to Remote Sensing Space Capabilities

While these examples present information sharing in a positive light, there could be drawbacks to such exchanges. For years the US has resisted requests from various developing countries for military assistance in the form of weapons systems which were not currently in their region. The US has denied the majority of such requests using the rationale that introducing a new capability could upset regional balances of power.¹¹ Giving a nation a new capability in satellite intelligence, something which PDD-23 conceivably allows, could likewise cause regional instability due to the military implications of such information. Additionally, as is always the case with cooperative instruments of national power, there exists the danger the recipient country might accept the incentive but not hold up its end of the bargain. What would happen if the US enabled a populous African country to obtain wide spread Internet access and then that country underwent a revolution similar to the one which disposed the Shah of Iran in 1979? A hostile regime could turn the power of the Internet against the US by inciting the passions of the populace through anti-US Internet propaganda. To prevent such dangers from materializing, US strategists must carefully weigh the risks before using information as an incentive to gain cooperation from other states and transnational actors.

COERCION

The above warnings notwithstanding, it seems clear information can be used as a diplomacy carrot, but is it also suitable as a stick? That is, can information be employed as a coercive instrument of state power. The strategy of coercive diplomacy (or compellence, as some prefer to call it) employs threats or limited force to control an adversary's actions.¹² Traditional forms of

¹¹Based on author's personal knowledge as a result of working in Joint Staff Directorate for Politico-Military Affairs

¹²Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft* (New York: Oxford

this instrument are embodied by economic sanctions, or political uses of military power such as peacekeeping or "show the flag" presence missions. The following discussion will show that while information can theoretically be used in a coercive manner, the concepts are still in their infancy and are largely based on conjecture.

Futurists like Alvin and Heidi Toffler, have written vivid accounts about how information might be wielded as a force which could supplant or gain primacy over the military as a means of compelling an enemy to do another's will. They describe ant-sized robots which could infiltrate government command and control facilities and destroy computer systems; "soft kills" on communications satellites obtained by inserting data commands which would render them useless; and computer viruses which could do more damage than bombs ¹³ Certainly these techniques offer intriguing possibilities for strategists. The ability to cripple a country's military command and control computer network could offer forceful leverage in diplomatic negotiations. Likewise, the capability to destroy communications satellites or disable stock market computers could be used to threaten a country with devastating economic damage and make its leaders think long and hard about acting in a manner which would run counter to US interests.

Unfortunately, limitations which restrict the use of information as a coercive tool of statecraft are substantial. First, nothing discussed by the Tofflers has yet been proven feasible. In practice, it still takes the application of military force to threaten a country's information infrastructure. Coalition forces did great damage to Saddam's information networks during the Gulf War, but this

University Press, 1995) 196

¹³Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War* (Little, Brown and Company New York, 1993) 120-150

was only done through the application of massive amounts of military force. Such measures, while effective, clearly defeat the objective of coercive instruments of statecraft which seeks to obtain national security objectives through actions short of military force.

Additionally, because of unintended consequences, there is serious reason to question the ability of the United States to successfully use information as a coercive form of statecraft.¹⁴ Specifically if the US were to attack another state or international actor's information infrastructure, America could encounter more damage than the target country due to in kind counterattacks. Being an open society, and one which is heavily dependent upon technology, the US is extremely vulnerable to information based warfare. In fact, a strategic information counterattack "on America's communication systems, including our military communications systems, air traffic control system, financial net, fuel pipeline pumping software, and computer-based clock/timing systems could result in societal paralysis".¹⁵ Although this matter is far from resolved, it may be that due to the possibility of escalation to full blown information warfare, the US cannot risk using information as a coercive form of power.

CONCLUSION

Even though the utility of information as a coercive tool of statecraft is still in question, the overall thesis of this paper remains sound. That is, as an outgrowth of the information revolution, information has uses in the realm of statecraft far beyond those of just a "soft power" tool. Today's statecraft strategist isn't limited to using information only as a persuasive tool. Because

¹⁴Barry R. Schneider and Lawrence E. Grinter, *Battlefield of the Future* (Air University Press Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama 1995) 163

¹⁵*Ibid*, 163-164

of the information revolution, the power of information is so vast it has become a highly valued commodity which can be exchanged with international entities to secure their cooperation toward achieving America's national policy objectives. Finally, there may come a time in the near future when information as a coercive tool of national power passes from theory to reality and offers still another avenue for strategists to meet US strategy goals. Clearly then, the ongoing information revolution has expanded the limits of information as a tool of statecraft.